

Penelope's Song

Penelope Murray

At the end of the *Odyssey* the soul of Agamemnon in Hades envies Odysseus his home-coming and pays tribute to the woman who made it possible:

'O fortunate son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices, surely you won yourself a wife endowed with great virtue. How good was proved the heart that was in blameless Penelope, Ikarios' daughter, and how well she remembered Odysseus, her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never die away, but the immortals will make for the people of earth a thing of grace in the song for prudent Penelope.' (Odyssey 24. 192-8).

The *Odyssey* is that song for Penelope, for she is as much the heroine of the poem as Odysseus is its hero. Throughout Odysseus' wanderings it is she who remains firmly at the centre of the epic, and it is she who symbolizes the goal for which Odysseus constantly strives: his home-coming. Odysseus and Penelope display in equal measure the qualities of cunning, intelligence, and endurance which Homer's poem celebrates, and the reciprocity of the relationship between husband and wife is one of its major themes. As Odysseus himself says, there is nothing better than a harmonious marriage, when two people live together as man and wife, like-minded in their thoughts. But the *Odyssey* is no simple romance, and it is not for Penelope alone that Odysseus yearns. His dominant desire is to return home to the ordered life which was his before he went to Troy, and we cannot separate his love for his wife from his love for his country and his home.

Odysseus held up

At the beginning of the poem we find Odysseus marooned on the exotic island of Ogygia, detained against his will by the lovely-haired nymph, Calypso, 'who desires that he should be her husband'. But despite the seductive temptations offered by the amorous goddess, after seven years Odysseus has grown tired of her charms, and sits on the sea-shore pining for his home and his wife. It is typical of this wily and much-enduring hero that when Calypso pleads with him to stay with her, he immediately concedes that she is far more beautiful than his wife Penelope:

She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless. But even so, what I want and all my days I pine for is to go back to my house and see my day of home-coming.

He is tactful enough at this point to emphasize that it is his home rather than his wife for which he longs. Calypso's island is a veritable paradise with its smell of fragrant cedar-wood, its shining fountains and luxuriant vegetation, but for Odysseus it cannot compare with the rugged land of Ithaca. And though Calypso offers him immortality, Odysseus rejects the life of idle hedonism amongst the vines and violets of Ogygia, choosing to be remembered as the hero of the *Odyssey* rather than the oblivion of living as Calypso's husband. (And here there is a parallel with Achilles in the *Iliad*, who chooses the hero's brief life of glory rather than a long life of obscurity.)

Odysseus encounters a number of female characters throughout his long years of wandering – Circe, Calypso, the Sirens, Scylla, Nausicaa – all of whom present him with some kind of threat to his identity as hero. A temptation which he is repeatedly offered, and not just by the females in the poem, is to forget himself and abandon his homeward journey for a life of pleasure,

whether it be in the land of the 'mild-eyed melancholy Lotus-eaters' (in Tennyson's phrase), or in the embraces of a Calypso or a Circe. Circe, the lovely-haired enchantress who detains Odysseus on her magically beautiful island, is in many ways a doublet of Calypso, though she is rather more dangerous. Not content with turning an advance party of Odysseus' men into pigs, she tries the same trick on him. But he, fortified by the magic moly given him by Hermes, resists Circe's spell, and succumbs instead to her physical charms, climbing into her 'surpassingly beautiful bed'. Odysseus and his men (restored to their mortal shape) spend a year on Circe's island 'feasting on unlimited meat and sweet wine', until Odysseus is reminded by his companions that he must go.

Suitors strung along

To leave not just one goddess, but two, requires some explanation. Why reject a life of ease with Circe or Calypso, or even the young and lovely Nausicaa, in order to return to an ageing wife and a life of responsibility? Homer presents the return to Ithaca as a return from fantasy to reality, to the home where Odysseus truly belongs, and this theme is embodied in the figure of Penelope, a woman who is every bit his match. Like her husband she weeps, endures, and remembers, deploying all her cunning and intelligence to preserve Odysseus' household for his eventual return. Whilst he has been dallying in the arms of glamorous goddesses, she has been using her feminine wiles to hold out against choosing a husband from the band of unruly suitors, who sit in Odysseus' palace as unwelcome guests devouring his livelihood. Seated at her loom she occupies herself with the

archetypal feminine activity of weaving, but at night she undoes what she has done during the day, and thus deceives the suitors and delays her remarriage. But at the point when Odysseus returns her stratagem has been discovered, and she is on the verge of giving in. Prompted by Athene she decides to display herself to the suitors, whilst, unbeknown to her, the disguised Odysseus looks on, happy

because she beguiled gifts out of them, and enchanted their spirits with blandishing words, while her own mind had other intentions.

Penelope's manipulation of the suitors delights her husband because he instinctively understands what she is doing: she employs exactly the kind of stratagem that he uses himself, thus confirming for us the reciprocity between husband and wife.

This scene is followed by the lengthy conversation between Penelope and the 'stranger' (Odysseus in disguise) in book 19, in which Penelope is told of her husband's imminent return. Even so she is determined to go ahead with the contest of the bow, claiming that she cannot hold out against her suitors any longer. Why Penelope should decide to stage this contest, which will result in her re-marriage, precisely at the moment when Odysseus has returned is a notorious problem: Penelope's motivation remains an enigma and has kept generations of critics guessing. But this happy coincidence, the kind which occurs in literature if not in life, enables Odysseus to reveal his identity by stringing the bow and killing the suitors while Penelope sleeps in her chamber.

Odysseus meets his match

When Penelope finally comes down from her bedroom she sits across from Odysseus in the firelight, facing him for a long time in silence. Most of the women whom Odysseus meets in the poem fall instantly for his charms, but not so the circumspect Penelope. Frozen in her grief and all too aware of the tricks the gods can play, she refuses to believe that this is Odysseus sitting before her, despite the assurance of her nurse and her son. Odysseus himself, repeating words that Telemachus has already spoken, contrasts her with all other women:

No other woman, with spirit as stubborn as yours, would keep back as you are doing from her husband who, after much suffering, came at last in the twentieth year back to his own country.

At this point in the poem Penelope is at her most magnificent: calmly and with the utmost self-control she asks Eurycleia to make up the bed that Odysseus had built and put it outside for the stranger, a request which produces an instant and angry reaction in Odysseus; indignantly he asks who could possibly have moved the bed that he had fashioned with his own hands, the secret of whose construction was known only to himself and Penelope. For once Odysseus is caught off his guard, and falls into the trap that Penelope has deliberately set up. At last Odysseus has found his match, for the only character in the entire poem who can outwit him in wisdom and cunning is his wife.

Equal yet mysterious

Penelope is famous above all for her role as the faithful wife. Weeping the lonely nights away as she patiently waits for her long lost husband, she has been portrayed as the image of female fidelity in Western literature from Homer onwards. But there is more to Penelope than that. Occasionally we catch glimpses of another story: in one post-Homeric version of the legend Odysseus returns to find that in his absence Penelope had enjoyed herself with several, or indeed all, of the suitors, a tradition to which Ovid alludes in the *Amores* when he suggests that there was more to the contest of the bow than meets the eye. The nineteenth-century critic Samuel Butler maintained that the

Odyssey was written by a woman, whose aim was 'to exalt her sex by showing how a clever woman can bring any number of men to her feet, hoodwink them, spoil them, and in the end destroy them'. And many feminist critics today are keen to point out that Penelope is far from the exemplary model of fidelity that tradition has taken her to be. Because Homer tells us little about her thoughts, her motives are mysterious and can never be finally determined.

For instance, in book 19 she asks the disguised Odysseus to interpret her dream for her: she dreamt that her twenty pet geese, in whom she took great delight, were one day attacked by a great eagle who swooped down from the mountains and killed them all. She wept and sobbed in her dream, but the eagle came back and told her to take heart, because the geese represented the suitors and the eagle was Odysseus, who would soon return as her husband. This omen is confirmed by the disguised Odysseus himself, but Penelope insists that the dream is false, and determines to set up the contest of the bow which will result in her finding a new husband. Why does Penelope reject Odysseus' interpretation, and why in her dream does she weep at the fate of her geese? Is it really that she enjoys the attentions of the suitors and at some unconscious level does not want her husband to return? How can we know the secrets of this woman's heart?

Penelope's desires may be ultimately unknowable, but for me her power lies in the equality which she shares with her husband. Of course they operate in different spheres, he in the world of sea-faring, adventure, and heroism, she in the domestic ambience of the household. Penelope's status depends ultimately on that of her husband, but within that framework she has considerable independence. She may be no goddess but she proves herself to be the ideal match for Odysseus. Like-minded in their yearning for each other, whilst he wanders and she weaves, both characters work towards their shared goal, equal in cunning, intelligence, and endurance. Tradition has made Penelope the paradigm of the loyal wife; but for Homer she is the equal focus and hero of the poem.

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